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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001192

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/06/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [TX](#)
SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: AMBASSADOR KROL MEETS WITH DIRECTOR
OF INSTITUTE OF DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

REF: ASHGABAT 1055

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Sylvia Reed Curran for reasons 1.4(B)
and (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On September 4, Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia George Krol met with Shirin Akhmedova, Director of the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (IDHR) and one the most reform-minded high-ranking Turkmenistan government officials. Akhmedova affirmed President Berdimuhamedov's desire to reform the penitentiary system. The Institute is working with the British embassy to come up with revised legislation that will reflect UN standards regarding penitentiaries. Akhmedova stressed the separation of powers in the new constitution and laid out a positive vision of greater NGO activity and independent journalism. Akhmedova praised the cooperation with the United States and said, unlike other countries, U.S. officials do not come with criticism, but rather offer concrete suggestions for improvement. While many issues regarding human rights and civil society remain unresolved, the fact that the President gives the Institute a relatively free hand in managing its operations is a positive sign that greater reform is possible. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia George Krol met with Shirin Akhmedova, Director of the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (IDHR) September 4 to learn more about the work of the Institute as well as progress in reforms. Akhmedova told Krol that there is political will and a desire for reform. Turkmenistan is taking concrete steps to advance reforms. For example, Akhmedova stressed that, under the revised constitution, there is now a clear separation of powers into Executive, Legislative and Judicial Branches, as well as efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination. She explained that the Institute's activities and mandates include giving legal advice for Turkmen citizens, preparing reports on human rights activities, working with various organizations on commercial/social issues, and disseminating information with the help of international experts. She particularly noted projects with USAID, UNDP, UNICEF, EU-TACIS, and OSCE.

DAS KROL RECOMMENDS VISIT TO USA

13. (C) Krol mentioned that, during his meeting with the President, Berdimuhamedov had underscored the value of the Institute and his support for it. Krol suggested that Akhmedova should visit the United States to meet with relevant NGO's and specialists.

INSTITUTE WORKING WITH ICNL REGARDING LAW ON RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

14. (C) Akhmedova explained that IDHR is working with the International Center for Not-for-profit Law (ICNL) (funded by USAID) and the UN to create a series of recommendations for a revision of the Law on Religious Organizations. She stressed the technical considerations of working with the embassies and other groups through roundtable discussions, seminars, etc. Akhmedov noted the current visit to Turkmenistan of UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Asma Jahangir. During Akhmedova's meeting earlier in the day with Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur had raised the issue of conscientious objectors. Jahangir gave concrete recommendations to the Turkmen side. While acknowledging that the constitution requires male citizens to serve in the military, Akhmedova said the question of conscientious objectors is on the agenda for discussion.

PENITENTIARY SYSTEM TO APPROXIMATE INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

15. (C) When asked about prison conditions, Akhmedova

ASHGABAT 00001192 002 OF 002

affirmed that President Berdimuhamedov wants to reform Turkmenistan's penitentiary system. IDHR advised the Parliament to revise legislation to reflect UN standards on prison conditions, both for adults and children. The British embassy is helping write the new legislation (reftel). As far as she was aware, she said, there is no ban on access by international organizations, including ICRC, to Turkmenistan's prisons.

HIGHER QUALITY MEDIA AND A ROLE FOR NGO'S - "WORK IN PROGRESS"

16. (C) When Krol commented on the powerful role the state media plays, Akhmedova acknowledged the need to galvanize the media in the country, get more qualified journalists, and in general, raise the quality of work. She said that efforts are starting to bring in specialists and equipment supporting independent press. Akhmedova agreed with Krol that the development of NGO's and non-government media plays a positive role in the development of civil society and contributes to the stability of a nation. She remarked that she hopes the private sector will be raised from 40% of the economy to 70% or more. She was optimistic about the recent tax and investment law reforms, signaling that "barriers are down and positive steps have been taken" in reforming the private sector.

AKHMEDOVA PRAISED COOPERATION WITH UNITED STATES

17. (C) DAS Krol presented Akhmedova with the ICNL analysis of the Law on Religious Organizations. Akhmedova said that there would be an events roundtable with USAID, inviting experts from various countries, on questions of implementing the new law at the start of 2009, corresponding with the election of a new parliament and finalization of a budget. She said that an earlier roundtable with ICNL and USAID on another topic was very successful, with a full hall and attendees actively participating. She said a series of joint events with a concrete plan of action has been planned. Akhmedova praised its cooperation with the United States and noted the close contact with both USAID and other Embassy officers. She said, unlike other countries, U.S. officials do not come with criticism, but rather offer concrete suggestions for improvement.

¶8. (C) COMMENT. Akhmedova remains one of the most progressive, reform-oriented, high-ranking members of Turkmenistan's government. While many issues regarding human rights and civil society remain unresolved, the fact that the President gives the IDHR a relatively free hand in managing its operations is a positive sign that greater reform is possible. END COMMENT.

¶9. (U) DAS Krol cleared this cable.
CURRAN